

Title	Futurism, Vorticism and the Prescience of H.G. Wells (Part Two)
Type	Article
URL	<a href="https://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/id/eprint/15112/">https://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/id/eprint/15112/</a>
Date	2016
Citation	Eden, Michael (2016) Futurism, Vorticism and the Prescience of H.G. Wells (Part Two). Trebuchet Magazine.
Creators	Eden, Michael

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Futurism, Vorticism and the Prescience of H.G. Wells (Part Two)

150 YEARS AFTER HIS BIRTH, THE INFLUENCE OF H.G. WELLS ON CONTEMPORARY ART IS STILL BEING FELT.

27/06/2016 Michael Eden Society



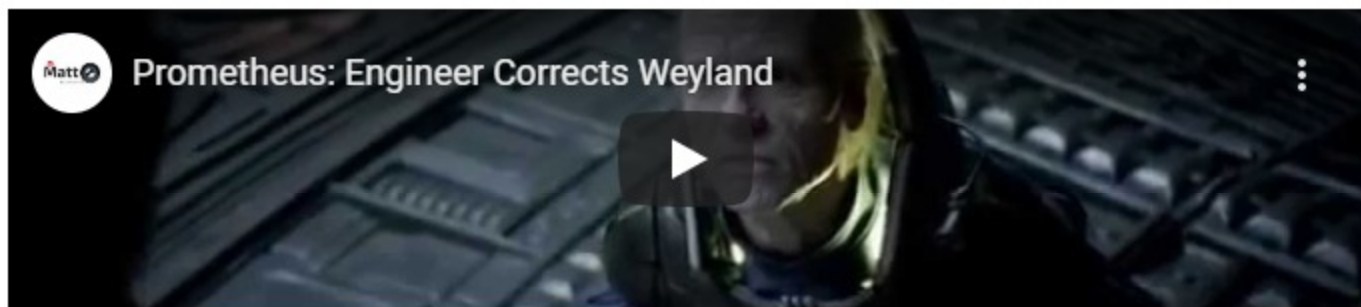
The artistic movements of Futurism and Vorticism in Italy and England respectively were bold and brash, they crashed into the art scene of the day with total confidence and absolute violence.

The energy however of F.T. Marinetti's and Wyndham Lewis's art movements flung themselves apart and both, (although more so with Marinetti) flirted with fascism and a so-called hard edged outlook. Although both men later regretted that, they never lost their cynical disdain for both the fatted elite and the lumpen masses. Much of this dash and malice approach, which was also especially present in Nazism, was due to a misinterpretation of the philosopher Nietzsche's 'Super-Man'.

Edwardian society was worrying away at this concept before the war and it is said (Malcolm Palsey) that HG Wells may have introduced the concept of the Übermensch to the British public when he has Ostrong from *The Sleeper Awakes* say:

The day of democracy is past...the day of the common man is past...this is the second aristocracy. The real one.... Aristocracy, the prevalence of the best – the suffering and extinction of the unfit, and so to better things... The crowd is a huge foolish beast. What if it does not die out? Even if it does not die it can still be tamed and driven. I have no sympathy with servile men.... The hope of mankind – what is it? That some-day the Over-man may come, that some-day the inferior, the weak and the bestial may be subdued or eliminated. The world is no place for the bad, the stupid, the enervated. Their duty – it's a fine duty too! – is to die. The death of failure! That is the path by which the beast rose to manhood, by which man goes on to higher things.... So long as there are sheep Nature will insist on beasts of prey.... The coming of the aristocrat is fatal and assured. The end will be the Over-man—for all the mad protests of humanity....' – Ostrong, Chapter 19 *The Sleeper Awakes* (1899, 1910)

Of course this identification is not the point of Nietzsche's Übermensch rather he proposes the Übermensch is posited by man as a goal. An interesting modern imagining of a confrontation between the deluded all too human Randian<sup>1</sup> superman and an actual Übermensch occurs in Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* (2012) where the wealthy Randian businessman and scientist Weyland, after waking up and engaging with the engineer, is violently cast aside as a total irrelevance.



The mistake, the misunderstanding, being that one might assume the mantle of this concept and imagine that understanding the words somehow inured the reader with the superiority of an Übermensch. It's as deluded as imagining that grasping the concept of self-knowledge means you have it.

Wyndham Lewis attempted to reignite the flame of Vorticism with Group X in 1920<sup>2</sup> but, lacking direction and co-operation from all participants it never got off the ground. He commented:

'But what could be done with an X? Art at the cross-roads? X marks our goal? No. X refused to co-operate. Group X set out, but got nowhere. X marked our beginning and our end,' (*Wyndham Lewis and the Cultures of Modernity* edited by Dr Nathan Waddell, Ms Alice Reeve–Tucker).

It's not simply a matter of dispensing with Lewis and Marinetti. They both offer a great deal in terms of the work they championed and in the work they produced. We have proposed to take up some of Lewis's and Marinetti's aggression and energy and use that in pursuit of a futurism of the left defined by a critical relationship with the sciences, with architecture, religion and importantly with technology.

Furthermore, the aim is to balance this with positive insights into human potential, without falling foul of the god complex so many flirted with at the turn of the century. Just as Wells (*inset above*) rescues one from that foible, Lewis can rescue us from the pandering, patronising voice of the popular arts with its great emphasis on dumbing down (see Pop Art, see Jeff Koons, and to a lesser extent Grayson Perry<sup>3</sup>)

Futurism and Vorticism would have benefited greatly from a relationship with Wells, who was available to them both, and for Lewis being initiated into the 'Intelligentsia', this would have made things much easier. Indeed, they did correspond on a few occasions. Wells praised Lewis's book *Childermass* and received a polite response, by then however (1928) Vorticism had long burned itself out. Wells might have offered those movements useful antagonism, possible subject matter and above all an exploratory, critical but positive project to follow World War One.

Read On: Part One

1 Ayn Rand famously personified her superior people as self-interested businessmen most notably in *Atlas Shrugged* 1957. Her rejection of altruism and celebration of the 'creative entrepreneur' is influenced by Nietzsche, however Nietzsche's Übermensch is not a proponent of the market nor does he exploit others.

2 A group of British artists formed in 1920 that showed their works at the Mansard Gallery, at Heal & Sons, London between 26 March and 24 April of that year. The core of the group was made up of the former Vorticists, Wyndham Lewis, Jessica Dismorr, Frederick Etchells, Cuthbert Hamilton, William Roberts and Edward Wadsworth. They were joined by Frank Dobson, Charles Ginner and McKnight Kauffer. The exhibits in the main were characterized essentially by a propensity to angular figuration not far removed from other experimental styles of the period. Group X was arguably an attempt by Wyndham Lewis to revive Vorticism, but this failed.

3 This criticism is broadly aimed at art movements who seek to entertain or to distract audiences afeared that if things get too serious the masses will switch off (or perhaps more likely, switch over). For a detailed critique of Perry (who represents something less offensive than Koons or Warhol but is nevertheless going down the wrong path) see, 'All Wrong, *the misguided adventures of an art world hero*' in Trebuchet Magazine.



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About Michael Eden > 77 Articles

Michael Eden is the Arts Editor for Trebuchet Magazine, an artist and researcher working in London and the south east, his artistic practice is concentrated on painting and he divides his time between this and lecturing in art history and contextual studies.

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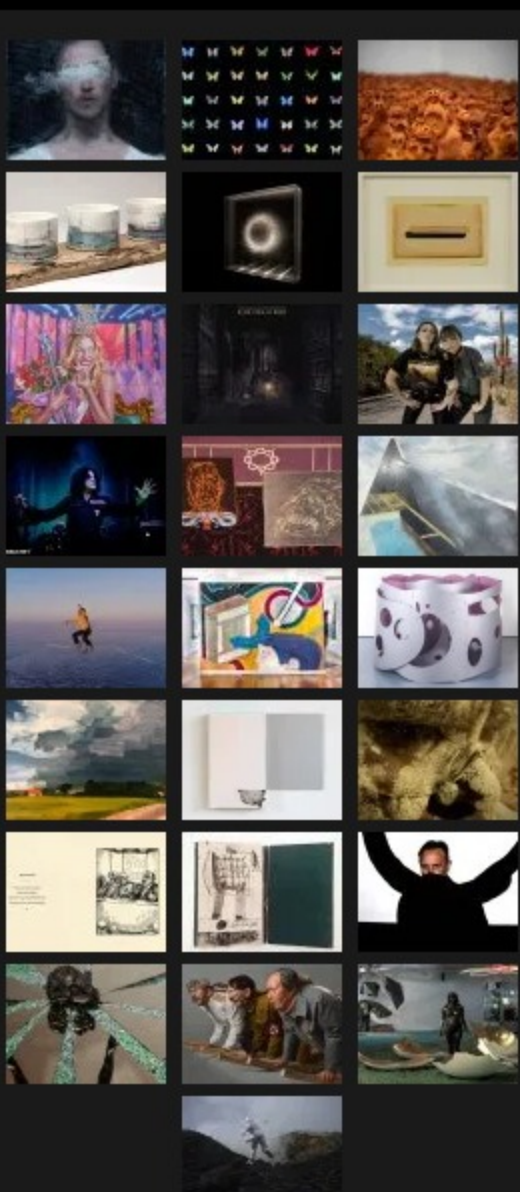
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